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John F. Kennedy Center

Body, Voice Imagination:
How Theatre Arts Curriculum Can Be Used
To Overcome Barriers For Students With Autism

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>>> JENNA GABRIEL: Hello, everyone, and welcome to the September installment of our VSA webinar series, which comes to you from the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and addresses topics related to the arts and special education. I am Jenna Gabriel, and I am your webinar moderator. Today's webinar is called body, voice imagination, how theatre arts curriculum can be used to overcome barriers for students with autism. If you would like to view live streamed captioning of this webinar, you can follow the link you see on the slide and in the chat box of the control panel located on the right side of your screen. Before we get started, let's touch base on the go to webinar control panel. This control panel can be hidden by clicking on the orange arrow in the top left corner. If you need to leave the webinar early, you can leave it by clicking on the "X" in the upper right corner. A recording of the webinar will be available afterwards so you can catch up on any parts you miss.

You can connect to the audio portion of the webinar through your telephone or through your computer's microphone and speakers. Select the option that works best for you. If you are calling in from your telephone, please make sure you mute your computer speakers. You can submit comments, questions or answers to questions using the chat panel located near the bottom of the control panel. I will monitor it throughout the webinar. If you prefer to speak your input rather than typing it, please click on the "Raise your hand" icon on the control panel and I will touch base with you and unmute your microphone at the appropriate time.

You will have a few opportunities to participate during the webinar. There will be polls during the webinar, which you will be prompted to respond to on your screen. We will also have the opportunity to ask questions once James and Nikki's presentation has concluded. During the open-ended question and answer time, please click on the "Raise your hand" icon if you wish to speak or type your thoughts into the chat panel.

Within the week, we will send out a follow-up E-mail with a link to the recording of today's presentation, a copy of the PowerPoint presentation, the handout and a copy of the webinar transcript. This means that you can go back to watch the recording and review supplemental materials in addition to any notes you may take during the webinar itself.

Our next webinar is called "The teacher and the teaching artist: Collaboration and community building in the classroom," and will take place on Tuesday, October 11th, 2016. Forgive me. That date is incorrect on your screens. It is Tuesday, October 11th, and the time is actually shifted, 4 p.m. to 5 p.m. eastern

standard time. If you haven't already, you can register for it now by clicking on the link in the panel. If you are active in social media, I invite you to connect with us using #VSA webinar, on Facebook, we are VSA international, and on twitter, we are VSAINTL and we would love to engage with you. And with that, I will turn it over to today's presenters, James and Nikki, take it away.

>> JAMES LEKATZ: Hello, everybody. My name is James Lekatz.
>>

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: And I'm Nikki Swoboda.

>> Jenna, we are not seeing the slides come up on our screen.

>> I am working on that right now. Hang tight.

>> JAMES LEKATZ: Oh, no problem.

>> You should have gotten an option now to share your screen.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: Not yet.

>> We are seeing your screen, so we're seeing the -- just the view of your Safari. If you go into your PowerPoint, you should be able to get into presenter mode now.

>> JAMES LEKATZ: Thank you.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: There we are.

>> Looking good.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: So today we're going to talk about body, voice, imagination and how we can use theatre arts to overcome barriers for students affected by autism.

>> JAMES LEKATZ: We're going to go over a short overview of what we'll be covering in this webinar. First we'll be going over some poll questions just to see who our audience is, and then we'll give our audience a little introduction to who we are, a background on Stages Theatre Company and then our key concepts.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: So for poll questions today, we want to know who we're talking to. Are you a teaching artist, classroom teacher, administrator, parent of an autistic child, know someone on the spectrum, combination of all? If you are a teacher, how long have you been teaching? And do you have any experience with working with kids on the spectrum? Do you have any experience with using a theatre inside your classroom?

>> JAMES LEKATZ: We'll just take a pause here so you can fill out that questionnaire, or that poll.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: And Jenna just give us a go ahead when you'd like us to move forward from the poll.

>> We are still getting a few responses in. So give it maybe another 30 seconds or so.

>> Awesome.

>> So James, we have closed that last poll and you guys are good to go on.

>> JAMES LEKATZ: All right. Here we go. Just little introductions about ourselves. My name is James Lekatz and I'm an education associate and arts access specialist at theatre stage company. I've been an arts educator for the past ten years, the last four specifically as Stages Theatre Company where I'm a resident teaching artist all over the Twin Cities. I'm also a lead teacher for the Cast Program which is an acting program for students we have affected by autism and I also specialize in working with other students who might have barriers to theatre, whether that be monetary or poverty or any other barriers that might exist for them. I go and teach and work with different organizations.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: And I'm Nikki Swoboda. I'm the education director at Stages. I have been a theatre arts and dance teacher for 15 years now. The last five years have also added arts administrator on to that list. As I continue to teach for our education program and also to lead it. I started at Stages in 2012 and was the -- one of the first things I did was start the Cast Program, which has created accepting sensory friendly theatre, and that is how we first began our relationship in working with the autism community.

>> JAMES LEKATZ: And here's just a picture of us. You can see kind of our day-to-day interaction.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: In which I look like a maniac, but, you know --

>> JAMES LEKATZ: It also looks like the cover of wicked, possibly. Who knows what's going on.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: You never can tell. A little bit about Stages Theatre Company. We are very happy to be celebrating 34 years this year, it's our 34th season. We are the second largest children's theatre in Minnesota. We are about ten minutes away from downtown Minneapolis, for those of us who don't know Minnesota and metro culture, so we're a tier 2 suburb. We are fortunate, however, to yes, be in the suburbs, but we have education and production programs in all of the seven counties of the Minneapolis-St. Paul Twin Cities area and we also tour to greater Minnesota. We have 11 tour spots this year between education residencies and production residencies in greater Minnesota. Every year we serve about 145,000 youth and family members through our production and workshops. Residencies and apprenticeship programs. Our education program is consisting of about six different areas. We have our workshop program, our acting conservatory, our residency program, after-school program, community ed program and then the open door program, and the open door program is dedicated specifically to people who have barriers that would prevent them from having arts programming in their lives. So we are very

fortunate at Stages that we have a fund that is just dedicated to giving that program to those agencies of people.

>> JAMES LEKATZ: And here's the mission of Stages Theatre Company. Stages Theatre Company is committed to the enrichment and education of children and youth in a professional theatre environment that stimulates artistic excellence and personal growth. Our core purpose, we use theatre to empower young people to create a positive influence in their world.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: All right. We're going to talk a little bit now about what the key concepts of our presentation is here today. We're going to begin by talking about what autism is and what the challenges and strengths that affect students with autism are going through those in detail.

>> JAMES LEKATZ: We'll grasp the benefits of how theatre pairs with the deficits of autism.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: And then finally we're going to take you through what an actual CAST class looks like. We're going to learn games and activities that use -- that we use with the students.

>> JAMES LEKATZ: Concept number 1, understanding what autism is and the challenges and strengths that affect students with autism. So what is autism? According to the diagnostic practice of it, individuals on the spectrum must exhibit social difficulties, communication difficulties, repetitive behaviors or adherence to routine. And this comes from the DSM-IV, which is the diagnostic book psychologists use and there's no confirmed study. I'm going to repeat that again. There is no confirmed study that tells us what causes autism.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: Even though people may have theories about that.

>> JAMES LEKATZ: Autism is known as a spectrum disorder. That means any child who is diagnosed with ASD is likely to behave and learn differently than another child with ASD. And we like to say that if you know one student or one person with autism, you know one person with autism.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: Great. And I just wanted to say in the pictures that we're seeing here, in this last picture, that was our -- this picture -- this is our full cast of our summer showtime production that we had. We did an autism devised project on world dolls, the BFG with peer mentors and then the picture on the slide we were just on is one of our stable -- we've seen him for years and years and watched him grow. Our friend Rowan.

>> JAMES LEKATZ: But here some common challenges with ASD. Social challenges, cog five and communication challenges and behavior challenges.

So with social challenges, there's one called theory of mind, and what this basically means is that you can't put yourself in somebody else's shoes. That's kind of a simple definition of it. So you can't understand how a person might be thinking or what a person might be going through because you can't. And so that is a challenge for people with autism.

Also, learning and interpretation challenges, so not being able to understand expressions or tones or gestures. Not having the instinct to be able to sit in a room, feel how the room is going and be able to adapt to that, and just a mystery about unwritten rules of communication and social application.

So cognitive challenges of autism or ASD is executive functioning, and executive functioning is the way that all of us who are neurotypical, we just function. Our brain works in many different ways all at once to communicate and work together so we understand language and move and behave, and with autism, the brain does not process information this way, so that oftentimes it comes out in anxiety of the students because they're not able to understand what is going on.

So here is another cognitive challenge, which is sensory processing, and this is one of the main things when we think of somebody with autism. We think of them as somebody who is unable to have a sensory -- like sensory overload, and so sensory processing, we talk about the five traditional senses, you know, that we all have that are known -- kindergarten going over senses, and it's the ability to take in information, so that is called -- and receive information, our senses do, and when we have an overload of senses, that's called hyper sensitivity, which is when we have too much stimulus going on, too much at one time, but we also have hyposensitivity, which means we're not getting enough, and the need to achieve more and more and more stimulus.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: And interestingly with the hyper and hypo part of sensory processing, we work with that a lot in theatre because so many times the general perception is that it's overload, overload, overload, so I know a lot of theatre companies are talking about doing sensory friendly programming, and we are on our fifth season of offering that on our main stage, and one of the biggest things we do in that training of the production teams that make these productions is say it's not just overload. It isn't just turn down the sound and turn up the lights a little bit because of the overload. It's also there are people who are starving for a sensory process, so if there's an opportunity for a tactile, or if there's opportunity for an actual interaction with an actor in costume, to go for it and break that fourth wall and have that interaction, and that really the biggest model is that, again, following if you know

one person with autism, you know one person with autism, opening up what that theatre experience can be allows that person with autism to approach the arts experience and the way that they are able to versus hyper and hypo vigilances.

>> JAMES LEKATZ: Also, we go back to communication. Now, some people with autism are very communicative, and if they have a special interest, they can talk to you for hours about a possible interest. One of my students really loves air conditioners, and air conditioning. I know now a lot about air conditioning because I've heard about them. However, there is some students who are not verbal at all, who are not able to talk, and if they do communicate, they might have a pair with them who helps them communicate or they might have like a laptop or a tablet.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: iPad.

>> JAMES LEKATZ: That's the word I'm looking for. iPad to help them communicate to get their words out.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: Interestingly, we've had two experiences with our cast programming, where kids who are considered non-verbal were excellent and dependable in saying their lines. One child, our very first session of doing our CAST Program, we didn't even realize she was completely non-verbal. We knew that she engaged sometimes, when she chose to, but she -- when we presented the showcase, she said her lines, the exact words, every single time without missing it. Her parents came to see the show case, broke down in tears because they had never heard their child say a full sentence whereas we in the classroom, we assigned a line and she said it because she was in and out of language with us. And then we have also had other children use their devices to say their lines. We had a wonderful, wonderful person one year with his iPad. He was a young boy, a young man, who screeched, and that was his communication, and it sounded like a screech, but there were certainly different levels of communication within that screech so he was a natural cast for Vlad, and then when it was time to say a line that involved exposition or direct contact to another actor, he could do it with his iPad. So we've been able to find new and different ways to serve each child as they come through the room.

>> JAMES LEKATZ: And behavioral challenges. So self-regulation is kind of a term that we use. So if a child becomes excited, frustrated, they have their own tools to know how to bring themselves to a state of calm, and you might see students who are rocking or on their tiptoes, bouncing, shaking their hands, flapping their hands, and those might be some of the ways that they're trying to bring calm back to themselves. And it might look really odd to us as teachers in the classroom if we're not experiencing it, but it is perfectly safe, and it

is just for the students to give a sense of calm back into their routine, to de-regulate a situation.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: For stimming, some children with autism walk on their tiptoes, they rock, they bounce, they flap their hands, whatever they need to do, and as teachers, we get to use touch in a way that we typically don't get to use in the classroom because touch and contact and the warmth of skin to skin sometimes can really help with the self-regulation so that if the flapping is happening, or there's energy that's coming out of the child that needs to be calmed, sometimes just reaching out a hand and allowing your hand to be held and have them move your hand how they need to move your hand is all it takes for that child to continue to be able to participate and engage in the workshop. Whereas in a typical classroom, we are not able to touch the students in such an open and freeway. But -- and this situation, the parents understand, support and get permission to work with the children.

>> JAMES LEKATZ: So some more behavioral challenges are triggers. And we're hearing a lot about triggers, just kind of in the news and media right now. But a trigger is a an experience or sensation that causes an escalation in angle side and if you look to the slide on the right, you'll see an anxiety curve and a trigger curve, and there's a five-sense process and you'll be able to sense when a meltdown or trigger experience is coming because students will -- their voice might change, they might become monotone, or their speech patterns might be very different, or the way that they stand next to you, the spatial awareness, either get very close or stand far away and you'll be able to sense when this is happening, and as the escalation -- once the full escalation happens and it hits the meltdown point, there's nothing you can do, and you just need to ride it out, need to ride out the situation. Try to prevent that from happening if it's possible, but if it's not, it just has to happen, and then as it comes back down, that's when you redirect students' focus to come back into a classroom setting.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: Great. Let's talk about strengths. It's really easy when we talk about kids who are affected by autism to talk about the deficits, so let's talk about the strengths. Honesty.

>> JAMES LEKATZ: You will never have a stronger group of students who will keep you honest. For example, one of my students always comes up to me every class and she goes, Mr. James, you really should cut your hair this week. It's getting way too long for your face. So, yep, you will hear all sorts of things from the students. It's not only things of that nature, but also when it comes to working on scene work, they will give you an exact reason why they made a certain choice,

and it's because I saw Sponge Bob do this, and that's the reason why.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: We have an attention to detail, highly skilled in areas of interest. There's a tendency to be logical. They're rarely judgmental of others. And with all of our kids in the room having autism, the first thing that goes away is their autism, so I've been in James' classroom before where a child does have a meltdown, and myself being an artist who's used to a typical classroom, I started to get anxious and then the other children in the classroom said, oh, DJ's just having a meltdown, give him space. No judgment, identification. Move on. Did not get distracted by it. Did not make anything of it, which is certainly not the case in a typical classroom when somebody's having an emotional moment. There's alternative creative thinking. Loyalty. Our CAST kids become best friends, and it sticks, it's so sweet. They make dates with each other to come see shows, and it's really fun. Memory for specific interest.

>> JAMES LEKATZ: Direct communication. Capable of incredible intelligence. They are true to themselves and they're extremely, extremely observant. So here's concept 2. How the benefits of theatre pair with the deficits of autism.

Now, here's a bit about our CAST program that you've heard us talk about. And CAST stands for creative accepting sensory-friendly theatre, and this program started in 2012. Nikki can talk a little bit about how the program was --

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: Absolutely. I came -- when I started at Stages Theatre Company I came from teaching at a theatre company up in northern Minnesota called the Duluth Playhouse and they had already had many years and seasons into a program called Stage Play which was a theatre program they used with kids on spectrum, and then they used teenage kids from their conservatory as peer mentors.

I had been a hired gun, a teaching artist, to come in and do a few workshops and decided to wander over to class, and I saw just an incredible, incredible class, and it touched me to my core in terms of what was possible, because I -- you know, we're told that kids on the spectrum aren't able to do this or aren't able to do that, or, you know, they have all these deficits, and yet there were fully realized plays happening in front of me. And incredible mask work, and just really incredible things happening. And so when I came to stages, I knew that I wanted to follow the suit of the Duluth Playhouse and the work they were doing, so I started it, and we continued to learn and have best practice as we learned. We categorized our true tracks by age, not by their dedication to their autism, and what we mean by that is we always talk about function, right, high function,

low function, and it's so, hmmm, simplistic and insensitive a bit because like I had mentioned earlier, kids' success in the program isn't connected to their function, and as typically defined. So you can be the only rule we have is that if you are non-verbal or you require physical assistance, that your aide also comes to class with you so that we can continue our teacher to student ratio.

>> JAMES LEKATZ: We are partnered with the Autism Society of Minnesota for our CAST Program which is great resources for training with teachers and also with our space and sensory friendly, and they recommend -- or they recommend that there should be a 4-1 ratio of students/teacher where we have three adults in the classroom at all times, and class is full at eight, so it's more like 2.5:1 in our class structure. And right now, we're in this great spot with CAST, where it started with one classroom of students, and then we developed it, and I took over the class, it was, again, one classroom. The year after that we started to do two, and it's geared by age. We have one group that is 7-11. The other group is 12-17, and our first year, we have a waiting list because classes are already full well before the start date, and we just were in the development for creating track 2. We have a lot of students who have been coming to the program, and we've got interests for what happens next, and so we're starting a program in -- CAST 2 is what we're calling it which will be a conservatory style acting program.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: For the arts administrators on the line, a few things about our CAST Program. Number 1, we begin all classes, we have the parents fill out a survey, a social skills survey so that we can identify, and our teachers, our two lead teacher and our one assistant teacher, they have a lot of prior information. Prior information is incredibly huge to the success of your class and the scaffolding of your lesson plans. So we do a survey prior and after to see the program, and then additionally, having a sensory friendly space to have your classes is absolutely needed for any sort of success in this, and we initially held our classes in our main building, which the kids had to walk through multiple art galleries to get to their classroom, and it was a sensory overload before they even got in the classroom, so luckily with our partnering, we've been able to find that space, and since we found the right space, we've now been able to grow.

>> JAMES LEKATZ: So at all stages of education, we have what we call the actor's tool box and it's kind of a thing that if you come through a Stages class, no matter what it is, you know what the actor's tool box is and that is using your body, your voice, and your imagination, and that's all that you need to

become an actor, and there are two other points that go along with that which is what we call actor neutral, so if you can imagine that when a painter paints, they paint on a blank canvas and create their art and a sculptor has a ball of clay. Well, an actor has their body so we have come from a place of neutral before we can start creating a character and also the teaching artist in me will say it's a great use of getting the class focused, from -- if we're doing activity, actor neutral is a great way for the classroom to come back to a center. And also what we call the actor promise, and say that an actor's number one job is to follow directions, and so the actor's promise is, okay, I'll try it. And sometimes you might be asked to do something you'll feel like, I don't want to be a dog today or I'm not going to talk in this weird voice. Actor's promise, it's okay to be silly and to try it at least just once. And then from there, we can develop the class.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: And okay, I'll try it, our actor's promise, of course, comes with a grand gesture that we remember every day.

>> JAMES LEKATZ: So when we approach them, the CAST Class with the actor tees tool box, our body tool becomes the use of non-verbal communication, so the deficits of nothing to follow, non-verbal accuse, the lack of instinct to follow, behaviors other peers and not knowing unwritten rules, we can take that deficit and pair it with the time and say that we have time in this class to figure out how do emotions look, how do emotions, how are they communicating through our bodies? What do we do, and that we can spend time actually working on emotions and we'll talk about some games that we do that, but we spend time working on that. Our voice tool becomes vocal communication, obviously, and so remember the deficits lacking verbal understanding, a monotone voice or lack of inflection and lack of vocabulary.

Sometimes students can talk your ear off about a certain -- like air conditioners, but that's it. They don't have vocabulary to keep on expressing ideas or help go forward and they might only talk to you via movie quotes, and so there's a lack of vocabulary. However, we are able to practice word choices, and also able just to stand in front of an audience and use your voice to communicate an idea, or a character, whatever that might be, or you have that ability to do that.

And then our imagination, we call that joining in play. So that the deficits know, that lack of creativity, the lack -- the flexible thinking, limited imagination that we get stuck in our interest sometimes and theory of mind, the ability to not see from another point of view, but in theory, we practice social interactions. We get to practice physical and verbally active

scene. Not just talk about them, we get to actually do them and figure out the actions and the consequence and role reversal. We're actually able to do these things.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: James speaks a lot about how kids love to do the negative. This is -- you know, social interactions, which initially when they begin the class are a nerve racking thing or a thing just ignored completely. There are a series of games that we'll talk about soon that James teaches where, okay, what's the wrong way of approaching a teacher? And they get to be silly and make the poor -- the wrong choice.

>> JAMES LEKATZ: The best wrong choice that they can.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: Right.

>> JAMES LEKATZ: The best wrong choice, and they do it fully because they've seen it a lot, because all groups who are under barriers are often told no, and so they know how to do things the wrong way because they're told they're doing it a lot and so when they have the ability to perform that. A giant safety net is through -- is open to them, and they're able to jump right on inside and explore.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: Right. And it creates an environment of freedom, where we -- if we -- if we're embracing the best wrong choice, we get to the best good choice.

>> JAMES LEKATZ: So notice in your chat box, you're going to see a little video pop up. It's a YouTube link to one of a presentation of a group of students, and this is a group that is 7 to 11-year-olds doing the final term presentation. So please, go ahead and click on that and watch this little two-minute video.

And you can let us know when the video is over.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: All right. Jenna is it okay to move forward?

>> Yeah. I think you're probably good.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: Great. Thank you. All right. Let's get into our actual class, games and activities to help students who are affected by autism.

>> JAMES LEKATZ: So we'll talk about the beginning of our class before we actually get into it. It's very important to create a very structured routine for everybody. What this does is it creates a very safe and welcoming environment that every student can expect to happen week to week to week. So here's how a class starts. We sit in a circle first and we do a verbal check-in. This way, students can hear what has happened since we met last time. It's also a great chance for students and the teachers to see how each student is doing that day. It gives us a chance to say, you're having a good day, perfect, or you're a little under the weather because you're sick, you have a cold. Great. We know what to do.

Then we start with a centering warm-up, and I always focus on the actor's tools first, and it's find an activity that is something that can grow during our course time. I like to do a lot of isolation work, so moving your body in isolation, which is like one part at a time, so just your head in a certain way. Just your torso or your hips in a certain way, in circles, forward and backwards, and what this does for your body, it gives a chance for students to improve as they go forward. Same with the vocal tool. Warming up your voice with a certain pattern, sometimes tongue twisters, or just diction exercises, and they improve over that time. After we do that kind of warm-up, I often have -- we have students do a warm-up, which is maybe a stretching of some sort, and we go around and the students pick one stretch. A lot of times it is something they learn in gym class that, oh, I want this one, it smells really good today and we go around and we do a stretch through the whole group because then it gives them a chance to do an ownership of what the class is doing, and that's more improvisational. But it's still that structure that students know this is going to be happening every time, and then we go over the schedule for the class of the day. And we end class the same way, where we review what we have gone over, and then going over what's coming for the following week.

>> And also sometimes with classes in some sessions, we've posted with the time and schedule it so other people can visually check in.

>> JAMES LEKATZ: And the schedule is on the giant poster boards. That's against the wall and we go over everything, and it's great because I have a couple of students who wants an activity done. They always ask and we go cross it off so we know exactly how we're progressing through the class.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: Having the schedule be posted, so that visually they've heard it, orally, and then they can be part -- being done with -- it's kinesthetic is huge, and kids trust the class.

>> And here's a whole bunch of games that we've found success with in our CAST class. A lot of games, they're adapting them specifically for an autistic class. This game, Kitty Wants a Corner is wonderful. It's great for just certain things that aren't even autism related of getting the willings out in every class, because when we're working in this class, behavior communicates everything. When we see a behavior, you need to think of a teacher, are they behaving that way because they're autistic or is it because they're eight and being able to decide and figure that out and this game is great for the younger kids, because it is a big movement game. It's Kitty wants a corner.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: So we get the whole group sitting in the circle. Someone is in the middle and they say Kitty wants a corner specifically to one person. So eye contact has to happen. Kitty wants a corner. The person responds, go ask my neighbor. Meanwhile, while that person is going around the circle, other kids in the circle make eye contact, silent eye contact, and that equals a contract to run across the corner, or run across the circle and change positions. So the cool thing about it is that you get to run fast, and wild, and then there's that moment of risk, of are you going to make it to the chair or not, but also the underline of it is that you are learning to make verbal contracts with somebody through eye contact, which is a social skill.

>> JAMES LEKATZ: Then one-word stories. We sit in a big group. You can sit or stand, whatever you would like, and you start a story, and it's one word at a time, so the leader would start off, and probably would say once, and might go around the circle to your left and the next person would say upon a time, and what this does is it gets the students to really listen to what is happening because you cannot have a story that goes once upon a time in a village cheeseburger. That makes no sense. Makes no sense. So what this does, is it makes students focus on what they're listening to and also works on that flexibility of thinking that they are able to be creative but still make sense within the story.

Environment, this is a great one. It's two-pronged, and this can be a whole lesson plan, just working on environments in the classroom so you have them stand up in actor neutral and say we're going to walk through imaginary environments today and that can be anything from the arctic to a jungle to a desert to a swamp to a farm, any kind of environment you can think of. And as we're walking through it, how do your feet land? If you're in a swamp, you have to take heavier steps in a swamp than you would on the arctic because you would be slipping. So we move around our bodies, getting our whole body engaged in this imaginative practice, and then as we're going through that, how are things, what do you see, and you call on somebody, and they say, I am seeing a polar bear. We all become a polar bear from the arctic. If we're in the swamp, I see a snake, we all become a snake. If we're on a farm, I see a cow, and we become these animals and then we move back, and so it's constantly what do we see? What's going on, moving our bodies like these different objects. As we explore the physical side, we have to also go back and do the verbal side, so if we're in a swamp, what does a swamp sound like, and how do we go about making those sounds with our voice or with our body percussion, use snapping, clapping, hitting or chest with your legs. How do we

make the sounds of those environments. This can be a whole lesson, and it's wonderful.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: It's great. And another benefit of this, or I guess just to key in on the benefit, this theory of mine benefit, is that even if we have our child, too, if they want to be an air conditioner judge, we can give them that one time where we are all engaging in his world of air conditioners, but then because we've all just said yes, we are all taking the next step and just taking a turn to go into the swamp with Mr. James. And in allowing something like this, it -- you know, we're having that power of saying yes to this child stuck in their world, but teaching them to take that turn and step out of their world.

>> JAMES LEKATZ: Emotions circles. And this is a great thing, too. So recognizing what an emotion might sound like or look like, so just standing in a circle, the leader will start off and say, I'm happy. And we go around the circle building that emotion. So if I'm saying, I'm happy at level zero, and by the end of it, whoever -- by the end of it goes complete circle, the person on my side will need to be at level 10 being the biggest:and so that's vocally the biggest and with the body the biggest, so it can be anything from, like, I am angry, I am sad, I'm surprised, I'm happy, I'm scared, but we start out from basic, from zero, and we build to level 10 vocally and physically.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: Also with emotions circles, when we're at a zero or a 1, we can start by saying just engaging your face. All right. Show me happy on your face, and that's a level 1. And then as we get going up through the level, that's about engagement of the whole body and self. Right, James?

It's just a little quick caveat on levels, James often organizations things with his kids through levels, so even if it's yes, joy at a level 1, level 8, similarly, if a child is feeling frustrated, he also will say what level of frustrated are you at? And then it's interesting because that allows the child to think about a number level as opposed to being stuck in that feeling, and I've seen James de-escalate quite a few situations by talking about a level instead of talking about a feeling.

>> JAMES LEKATZ: Changing rhythm. This is another game that's great for non-verbal communication. So one person will be asked to leave the group because they'll be coming in to find out who's changing the rhythm and the group will pick a leader then and they'll start with the rhythm. It could be clap, snap, clap, snap, and the whole group starts this clap, snap rhythm. The person is asked to come back into the circle, and as the clap snap is going around, the leader of the group will change

it. So it could go -- we start out clap, snap, clap, snap, and then it goes to just clapping. And the job of the person in the middle to figure out who is changing the rhythm. And you know, it's just -- from looking around the room, how are people responding to the rhythm being changed? Who are we looking at? Fighting those clues of how the whole group is changing, or are we able to work on this game?

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: James, how do you address sensory issues with this game, because it's noisy?

>> JAMES LEKATZ: Sure. So a lot of our students, they will just say it's getting too loud in here, and so if it's something -- and we also have the head phones in our classroom in case it does get too loud, and we know our students all know each other fairly well, and so we know what we need to do. If it's not that -- if you don't know what's going on, or your students in the class, always ask -- this might get loud today, please let us know if it's going to get loud and the students will tell you.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: So you would never do this on the first day of class.

>> JAMES LEKATZ: No.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: How far in the class?

>> JAMES LEKATZ: Halfway through or maybe the next day. Just the first day of class is always getting to know your students and having fun before we start getting together because they need to feel comfortable.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: Great. Thank you. I quick jumped in there and had to ask questions to people. All right. Bibity. Standing in the circle, one person is put in the middle. You can see a general theme here, right? The circle and the person in the middle is an important thing because so much of the benefit of the theatre about the social skills, right? The middle person will challenge a person in the middle by saying bibity bibity Bob. If challenged by it, that person needs to say bop before. So I went up to James, I would have to say bibity bibity.

>> JAMES LEKATZ: Bop.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: But if he didn't get there, he would be that person in the middle, and then he can continue to add on variations.

>> JAMES LEKATZ: So we can even do verbal variations, so like zipity zippity , and your response is , or hippity hippity hop, you have to change the sound of that letter, or physical ones, too. So elephant is a great one. So elephant is the person, if I was to say to one person, elephant, the person I'm saying it to, it becomes the trunk with their arm, but the person to their left and right becomes the elephant ears. So

it's not just a game of who's going to get it, but the whole group has to be paying attention as well. Hula is another great one where the person in the middle becomes a palm tree and the people to the left and right become hula dancers, and then jell-0, the person in the middle start wiggling like jell-0, and the people in the middle become the bowl.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: Now, mirrors. With CAST class it works really well. We can do face mirrors and go through emotions or body mirrors and do characters. We have Columbian, and the benefits are eye contact, following, and also adhering to that give and take in partnership.

>> JAMES LEKATZ: So here we get into what most of our classes based on improvisation would get into the social working in the class, so these next games, freeze is just a basic improv we use a lot. So freeze, two people come up on stage and we also give them the idea of a provocation to start somewhere, so you're in a coffee shop, going to the zoo, you're in the grocery store, waiting in line and those two people on stage have to create a scene. And sometimes it's difficult to get the inspiration of what it will do, so the teacher, we will assist the students are ideas as we go forward but once that scene is happening, if anybody in the audience is inspired by something, a physical choice that's being made or a word they hear, they yell the word freeze and the actors on stage freeze where they are full body. Then the person who called freeze will go up on stage, tap out the actor, take their full body position and then start another scene based on what they are inspired by. So if the scene is something where I am fishing and my arms are going out in front of me and I'm casting out my line, somebody might say freeze, take my spot, come back in, and all of a sudden they are flying a kite, and the scene becomes about that, so it's all about what's being inspired by what's happening on stage and fully jumping into their imagination.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: What happens when you have the same two kids saying freeze all the time?

>> JAMES LEKATZ: Then you give a limit. It's like you've done this the last couple times, let's give somebody else a chance.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: Do you ever assign it when kids are not volunteering?

>> JAMES LEKATZ: Yes. And so as we start this game off, when people are starting to feel comfortable with each other, because there's three adults in the room, we have an adult on stage the whole time always being one person so there's always a comfortability and also the story -- because sometimes the story just might not go far as students are developing their improvisation skills so that person is able to keep on provoking

and making the story happen and going forward and the teachers never take out, only the student is.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: Great. But it still sticks two people?

>> JAMES LEKATZ: Two people. And improv, this is talking about doing things wrong so we pick social settings and just interactions. The idea of tipping, for my older students is really complicated. They don't know why do you tip, and how to judge how much, because it's based off service so we talk a lot about tipping and about just interactions at the school and if they have with their parents, and this is the one where we do it wrong. We start out wrong and how do you go about doing it wrong and then from there we work our way back and the best thing about this one is we ask for the audience for the response. So we see a scene that's done wrong. Okay. Wait. Thank you very much for the scene. Audience, what did you notice? What happened in the scene? And through that feedback, we're able to work on the scene again, so we take the feedback, work on the scene, do it again. Audience, what did you notice? To work into a way that makes sense, that is more -- I'm air quoting -- appropriate for social constructs, so that's the way that we get this improv to work.

If you have any questions, we have some time left. About ten minutes left here for questions. Please let us know. If you have any questions about what you have heard or what you have seen.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: We kind of raged through a lot of that fast.

>> Great. So give me one second to take back the screen. And we have now reached the question and answer portion of our webinar. So if you haven't already, now is the time to enter a question into the question box or to raise your hand. I'm going to start by just commending both of you. I think having two people -- I know for me I had questions come up and as I was asking them, Nikki, you were asking James the exact same question. So I want to commend both of you for so adequately reading the room, despite not having a room to really read.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: Thank you. Thank you. Appreciate it.

>> Great. So some questions starting to come in. Do you use the words "Right" or "Wrong" when you talk? I'm going to project that perhaps this is about behaviors, when you talk about making, you know, the wrong choice, and starting in that moment with your improves, but what wording do you use with students?

>> JAMES LEKATZ: I would say there's never a wrong choice, so in that context, yes, we say there's never a wrong choice, anything you do is possible. However, working on scene work with improv, cool, that was a very strong choice you made. What

is another way you can make a choice, or how else could you make a choice like that? So it's never right or wrong, but how else could you do something? If you want to ask your mom permission to go to a movie and you say it maybe really angrily, cool, you asked mom how to go to a movie, how else could you ask mom to go to a movie.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: Either/or, new ideas.

>> Great. How do you recruit children?

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: Great question! So it's taken a long time for stability with this programming, and certainly an even longer time to make it, you know, stand on its own without any contributed funds. So like any community that has barriers and typically has a marginalized experience from, you know, greater society, it's that relationship is slow to develop. So the first year that we did it, we kind of went in through all personal connections, and we had to do -- not had to, but very -- we had to really join the community, the autism community before we were seen really as a trusted source to send their children to. The families affected by autism send their kids to more therapy than I can even wrap my brain around. Very many times, they are over-scheduled, certainly financially, I can't even imagine what these families are going through, and then yet again, it's a growing -- it's a growing condition that's not going anywhere, so there's more and more opportunities for them. So how we have worked through this in making it a sustainable program is by partnering with places like the Autism Society of Minnesota. We've partnered with another organization, another social service organization for kids with different developments called St. James Center for Child and Family Development. We do things like we attend the Autism Speaks marathon every year, where part of -- we are full-time residency at the Whole Learning Academy -- or Academy of Whole Learning, excuse me, they changed their name. So we've really joined the community because without that trust and consistency in the community, we were not -- our first year, we were not able to run one of our three sessions due to low enrollment. And it's just -- we've really had to prove ourselves as being devoted to this specific community as a whole, and not just devoted to the idea of providing theatre programming for kids on the spectrum. So as our programming for -- our educational programming has grown, so has our attendance for sensory friendly performances on our main stage, and we're the first theatre company in Minnesota to provide those as well. And now, we provide one for every single show on our season.

>> JAMES LEKATZ: Along with two school day matinees.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: Right. So for the many schools that serve specifically this population. It is a lot of -- it's

one-on-one. You can't -- putting up a social media post saying, hey, we have a sensory friendly performs does not work. The relationships are the only thing that are really -- that are really trackable in terms of your marketing efforts, and then the numbers that show up for not only sensory friendly programming but also for enrollment into the CAST Program.

>> JENNA: Great. Can you talk a little bit about how you work with 11 to 17-year-olds in the same program, just given the potential for a large developmental divide.

>> JAMES LEKATZ: Sure. So it's 12 to 17 years old is what we have our two groups at. So it's 7 to 11 and then 12 to 17. Right now, and we're lucky that all of our students in that group are actually 14 to 17. What happens is we don't have the 12 to 13 -- we're going to this year. We're going to this year. There is three students who have graduated into the older group, so that's going to be interesting to see how that's going to work. But it is the developmental of the age range, it's just -- we're going to figure that out as we go. It's figuring out the best practice as we go sometimes we don't know. Like, this is the first time it's going to happen for us. And so we'll figure it out. We'll let you know how it goes.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: With the developing CAST, it has been a very humbling and rewarding experience that we continue -- we both strongly feel the best practice is new every single session. What was best practice last session, we will learn more and create another best practice for a second session. So we are very humble in listing ourselves as learners, and hopefully leaders in the program, but really we're learners, and we learn so much from our kids and our community and our social partners on how to continue this programming.

>> JENNA: Great. How would you or would you approach these games differently in a larger, integrated classroom?

>> JAMES LEKATZ: Oh, in a larger -- you mean like a mainstream group? Is that what you're talking about?

>> JENNA: I'm going to combine, actually, a couple of questions that I'm seeing in the interest of time. We do have some folks asking if you do any classes that have neuro-typical kids along side kids with autism and so I'm going to project for this question how you might approach these games differently in an integrated or inclusive.

>> JAMES LEKATZ: Sure. So this summer was our first time that we had peer mentors involved in our program, so we had -- and it was for -- geared towards a production where we did our BFG production this summer and so we had 11 students who were on the spectrum in the class, and that was all older students and then we had seven peer mentors as well, and so the peer mentors went through a training of how to work with students who are on

autism spectrum, knowing that they are mostly the same age, so that was kind of an interesting process to go through, but just the way of how do autistic students think. And during that process, we treated it as if it was just a typical rehearsal, that everybody is there to put on a show to the best of their ability. And so there was no going about, oh, you have a disability, we'll take it easy with you. Absolutely not. Or you are a typical student, but you're working with other people like you. Absolutely not. It was a traditional rehearsal setting that our expectations were kept high and all of the students met it. It was a three-week-long process and by the end of those three weeks, and three weeks only rehearsing for about an hour and a half a day. And by the end of that three weeks, it was a 50-minute play that was off book and memorized, which is pretty remarkable, because that doesn't happen very much with most groups.

>> NIKKI SWOBODA: And also, we do plenty of in-school residencies where there are neuro-typical kids, obviously in the classroom and that kids are mainstreamed, and in those situations, we ask for if we didn't get the communication up front of needing to serve somebody specially in a different way, if we sense that once we're in the classroom, and, you know, at this point in time as educators, we kind of read a room and know what we're dealing with without having to read ideas too much, but then we scheduled more appointments with aides, education associates or teachers to give us more information so that if we need to bring an intern, we need to bring a co-teacher to have more hands on help, then we will absolutely do that and again we're lucky that we have an open door program that's dedicated to providing that kind of help.

>> JENNA: Wonderful. Well, thank you both so much for such a wonderful webinar. I'm going to ask our webinar participants to please remain on the webinar for a few moments longer to complete a short evaluation survey that will open when you close the window. That feedback is so appreciated by our team as we craft our upcoming season.

And finally, thank you for joining us. If you have questions or comments, you can feel free to contact me directly by E-mail at jgabriel@kennedy-center.org or by phone at 212-416-8861. Thanks again and have a great day.

[Webinar concluded]